

Written in Dance

A conversation with Mette Edvardsen

Asa Horvitz

Mette Edvardsen is one of the most compelling choreographers working today. She began her career in Brussels as a dancer for international companies such as les ballets C de la B. Since the early 2000s her body of work has expanded the boundaries of choreographic practice, shifting choreography away from a tool for organizing dance towards an expanded capacity to organize media and phenomena. Edvardsen's work combines a rare sensitivity—to space, rhythm, sound, light, and language—with a quiet and unassuming rigor that often catches audiences by surprise. What first appears basic and quotidian becomes luminous, alive, thrumming. She invites us to understand how we see and how we imagine. There is a politics at play here, not in the form of literal ideologies, but a politics of using the organization of space, time, performers, language, and objects—in such a way that unpredictable and open-ended shifts in perception happen to the audience. In a time when even experimental live performance is increasingly spectacular, market-driven, and obsessed with identity and innovation, Edvardsen's work stands as a beacon of integrity, patience, and subtlety, a model for how contemporary choreography might awaken the individual and collective imagination.

ARB: Can you introduce our readers to your work *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*?

ME: In *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*, a group of people dedicate themselves to memorizing a book of their choice. Together we form a library of living books. Readings take place as intimate one-to-one encounters where the 'book' recites its content to the 'reader.' The work is more about embodying than preserving. To learn by heart is much more than adding content to one's head.

I wanted to find out what it means to 'become a book,' to learn books by heart. I was interested in memory, not only for the future, but as a process. One important source for the project is *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury (1953), a future vision where firemen burn books, and an underground movement learns books by heart. We start where *Fahrenheit* ends. It's a poetic gesture to say that "we are books." We started out with seven people. I had no idea then that the project would develop to where it is today: a library, a bookshop, a publishing house, over 130 living books in 20 different languages across Europe and beyond, workshops, an exhibition format, lectures and talks. And underlying all this is an ongoing practice of making time to memorize and read out loud to each other and visiting readers.

ARB: Your new performance *Livres d'images sans images*, is a collaboration with your teenage daughter, Iben. While watching it I was touched by how some elements were tightly organized and other parts seemed loose. I became aware of the presence of things one doesn't necessarily pay attention to—the room itself, the night air, time, other spectators, in a way that moved me. This resonated with your text "The Picture of a Stone," published in the *Post Dance* anthology in which you express interest in "what we can name in language and (also) what we cannot name but is there anyway." Can you say more about this? Does this approach to choreography have a political dimension?

ME: I try to make works where I am organizing or composing materials in space, and time, for the audience to make their own journey. I want to open new spaces in the imagination. For me it's important that it's not about a specific imagination. It can be specific in the way it's open, or certain moods or qualities, rhythms, times. But I don't want to shape your imagination, or to tell you what to think. There's a careful composition made. If political, it's in this way I think it can be powerful. It's tricky to speak of the political in the art context today. It feels like there's no room left for that. It doesn't make it less important to claim spaces for art—or aesthetic experience. On the contrary.

ARB: Can you say a bit more about claiming spaces for art?

ME: Spaces of art and art making are under threat due to the current political trends of right-wing governments that are washing over Europe. They typically do not value art as a common, necessary good in society, and what does that do to art? We must not speak their language, do what they want, adapt to their demands, because then we are undermining what it is exactly that art can do. It's important to resist and keep creating these spaces.

I feel that often politics is reduced to topics. I am not against the idea that we use art to make change in the world. I believe in the power of poetry, transformation, and aesthetic experience. It's a basic need. Art cannot solve direct problems. But I believe that art can do things we cannot do in other ways.

And right now we are all getting so desperate for action and change, witnessing the terrifying crises going on in the world, it can be hard to claim the 'space for art' in moments like these. But maybe we need art for solace, to grieve, to heal, to rest. I don't think art is what saves us in the end, but I am convinced that we need it while we're here.

ARB: What is choreography for you?

ME: I danced and worked for several companies and choreographers. At some point I started to make my own pieces, while still working for and with others. So it was from the perspective of doing, as a performer, in space. And I am always inside of my works, performing them. I was and still am writing from inside the work. In this sense I still consider myself a performer. Also when writing, I am writing in space. The way it has changed over time is that I move through different materials, from using objects to language and speech, for instance. I somehow

feel like I am always doing the same. Ideas are not coming out of isolation, they come out of a process and exist in tension with each other. I do have a sense of one thing leading to the next, even if it's not a linear development, perhaps more a constellation. While I am working, when something 'new' is being shaped, I might still be performing other existing pieces or works. And each time performing, being inside of it, practicing a work, I am again connected to the process. It's part of a whole.

ARB: You wrote that you think of choreography as writing. Can you say a bit more about this?

ME: I think of choreography as writing, in space and in time. The pieces where no words are being used, I think of as writing too. My first pieces were quite mute and I was working with objects and actions. Language, first as spoken words, brought an important change in my practice. I was questioning my relation to objects in my work. I wanted to make something with nothing. So I painted all my objects black, to make them disappear. And with the removal of the objects, language came in. This was the beginning of the piece *Black* (2011). I worked with language as material. I tried to make things appear by naming them and relating to them in space. I worked with negation as another feature of language in *No Title* (2014) and tenses (time) in *We to be* (2015), written as a play, then with a choir in *oslo* (2017), and an opera *Penelope Sleeps* (2019). In terms of how I used language, it moved from single words in repetition, negation, a single sentence repeated always changing, a play, storytelling, and so on. I think that considering the medium and spaces for each specific piece plays a big part in the writing too. I don't start from content.

ARB: What do you mean you don't start from content?

ME: I don't start with what a piece is about. I work more abstractly, although some elements are very concrete. I feel that I am oscillating between concrete and abstract at the same time.

When writing *Penelope Sleeps*, I was not writing a story about the figure of Penelope, following the mythologies and stories around her. I started with the interest of the operatic voice, the physicality and scale of it. I was interested in the space in the body. I imagined the body lying down. And that the audience could be close to that. So, quite far from the image and gestures of opera. The body lying down could be a body resting, sleeping, dead. The themes came from there. It helped me to organize space and time, indeed. How to place the audience, sitting quite close to us. It's like I am working from something abstract, a feeling, a space—and then concrete things help me to get there. With *Penelope Sleeps* I wanted to create a piece you could come inside to rest. The voice and the music were important to open and hold this space.

ARB: Can you talk a little bit about how *Livre d'images sans images* is structured, and what effect you hope the work will have on spectators? How do you see this work within the overall trajectory of your works?

ME: We worked over a long period of time and collected quite a lot of material. Making a vinyl record, and playing tracks from it was part of the performance. Composing and making choices was a negotiation between the vinyl and what was taking place in space. So working with these media together shaped our choices, as well as what was included inside the cover of the LP. The big drawing for example, that wasn't there from the very beginning. We drew a lot, trying different shapes and sizes of paper. That was very much a space relation, more than drawing. All the choices were made together and we were quite tuned in together. This work is very much integrated in my trajectory of works, at the same time being something very specific from Iben and I.

ARB: How was it to work with your daughter on that piece?

ME: When we started to work on it, Iben was 11 years old. At that point it was about making something together, and it wasn't clear that she would actually be on stage with me. Working with a child, or a young person, there's other considerations and care towards the work. Then the pandemic hit, and we spent a lot of time at home. There were events, external to our process, that shaped how we could and couldn't work. This has also given another time quality to the work. It's not at all obvious to me that more time will make something better, it could have also killed it for us. What it did allow was for that to work over a longer time. It grew with us. And we grew with it. It was easily integrated into our life. I would not have been able to make this piece with someone else.

Asa Horvitz is a performance maker and musician/composer.



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